

Sustainable Agriculture In the Mid-Atlantic States

Culturally Significant Plants: An Introduction

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Introduction

When we become comfortable with our routine of life we take things for granted, especially in modern times. A common example is if one has a headache to go to the medicine chest for a remedy. What is not so common is the realization that many of our medicines, whether pharmaceutical or herbal, come from plants native to North America. Chemicals derived from plants are in over 40 percent of prescribed medicines in America. We also must honor the American Indian Nations for sharing their hard-earned plant knowledge, making possible the development and improvement of remedies that we use in modern times.

Now take the example of having a headache and reaching for that remedy, but it is not there because the plant that it came from is now extinct. This scenario, which represents the loss of an important plant species, is one many are working to prevent.

A study published in 1998 by the Smithsonian, the World Wildlife Fund, and others reported that up to 29 percent of the plants in the United States are at risk of extinction, including many important herbs.

Several organizations, such as United Plant Savers and the National Center for the Preservation of Medicinal Herbs, have identified

species of herbs whose wild populations are “at risk,” including Goldenseal (*Hydrastis Canadensis*), Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga Racemosa*), Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum Thalictroides*), and Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria Canadensis*).

Reasons for a decline in wild populations include a decrease in habitat, as well as over-harvesting. One way to help reverse the trend is to cultivate the medicinal herb, which will take some pressure off of harvesting the plants from the wild.

Adding the cultivation of medicinal plants to one’s agricultural operation may help the business achieve sustainability. Sustainable agriculture typically involves producing a needed product in a way that protects and enhances the environment, uses natural resources and cycles, as well as helps maintain economic viability and adds to the quality of life of the producer and society. A few benefits of growing some types of medicinal plants are that they utilize an area of the property that is idle, such as woodland; they take up little space compared with other crops; and they add diversity to the business.

Historical Background

American Indians took the knowledge of medicinal plants, including their habitat, harvesting methods and uses, very seriously. Through many centuries of trial and error, they became highly skilled at maintaining health and

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treating illnesses by incorporating plant use into their medical programs.

While most members of the American Indian Nations had general knowledge of plants to use in every day life, there was usually a “specialist” or “herb doctor.” Training in the knowledge of healing herbs and other plants usually started during childhood with a dream vision. This guidance would come to girls or boys and start them on their path as a healing practitioner. For those that chose to pursue this opportunity to help others, there was the added benefit where “practicing medicine was a way for many Native American women to gain prestige, power, and even wealth.” (Niethammer, 1977)

Many Nations emphasized the idea of conservation with the harvesting of medicinal plants. The healing practitioner would search in the fields and forests for needed materials. Members of the Delaware Nation would make an offering of tobacco to the plant and perform a small ritual of smoking a pipe and saying some prayers to “...appease the Spirit of the plant.” (Tantaquidgeon, 1995) Then the practitioner would search for more of the plants, leaving the original plant intact. Besides showing respect to the original plant, this method also ensured that the last plant of a species was never harvested.

This respect for the plants and the healing gifts they give to humans was also given to dried herbs. If a practitioner had some of the needed plant already harvested and dried, they would still perform a ritual to offer respect and thanks before its use.

The healing practitioners also promoted conservation by the action of collecting only what was needed, with regard to species as well as quantity. This conscientious method of what we label today as “wild-crafting,” ensured that the needed medicinals would remain available in their lifetime, as well as for future generations. This mind-set is represented in the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy: In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.

Dedicated practitioners would also trade medicinal plant materials with other Nations to increase their knowledge and skills, and to obtain plants not readily found in their local area.

Culturally Significant Plants

There were many plant species that were important in daily life historically to American Indians in the Northeast. The four herbal species mentioned before, which are labeled “at risk” in modern times, were also of importance in historical times.

Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) was used by the members of the Iroquois Nation for rheumatism, as a blood purifier, to promote milk flow in women, and was applied to babies with sore backs.

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) was used as face paint in the Big House Ceremony of the Delaware Nation, in addition to its healing properties for general debility, and as a stomach remedy. Members of the Mohegan Nation used an infusion of bloodroot to purify the blood and to paint designs on splint baskets. It was also used for burns, sore throats, sores and ulcers.

Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*) was used by members of the Mohegan Nation for kidney disorders. Members of the Iroquois Nation used blue cohosh as a tonic, in foot/leg baths for rheumatism, and for treating gallstones, and fevers.

Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*) was used by members of the Iroquois Nation for treating whooping cough, diarrhea, liver troubles, fever, sour stomach and gas, earaches, and heart trouble. A strong yellow dye was also obtained from the rhizomes of Goldenseal.

Not only are medicinal herb species of cultural significance, but also plants which had other important uses in daily life, such as the Black Ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) and Sweetgrass (*Hierochloa odorata*).

The Black ash tree, sometimes called Brown ash, was mainly used for basket making; however, it did have medicinal qualities. In the Iroquois Nation it was used to treat painful urination, as a foot soak for rheumatism, for earaches, as a laxative, and to induce pregnancy. Although not mentioned in the herbal “at risk” list, Black ash has been severely declining in population through the years. Several organizations are trying to reestablish this species for modern American Indian use.

Sweetgrass (*Hierochloe odorata*) has been burned in sacred pipes during ceremonies, as well as made into braids and burned as incense. Sweetgrass is an example of a ceremonial plant. Medicinal plants are collected and used to treat physical ailments or to maintain good health. They are highly respected plants, but ceremonial plants are of a different, higher priority than medicinal plants. Ceremonial plants are deemed very sacred as they are used to cleanse and enhance one’s spirituality as well as to make an offering of respect during times of prayer.

In general, there used to be an eastern (*Hierochloe odorata*) and western (*Savastana odorata*) species of sweetgrass. Now, *Savastana* is synonymous with *Hierochloe odorata*. Both are used for the same purpose in ceremonies; to induce the presence of good influences or benevolent powers, and to elevate prayer to the Creator in the smoke.

It should also be noted that the collection and use of culturally significant plants is still practiced today by many American Indian Nations, which is why it is important that these plants are preserved.

American Indian Nations* of the Northeast¹:

Abenaki Nation, NH
 Abenaki Nation, VT
 Aroostook Band of Micmac Indians, ME
 Cattaraugus (Seneca), NY
 Cayuga Indian Nation, NY
 E. Pequots, CT
 Echota Chickamaugo Cherokee Tribe, NJ
 Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, ME
 Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, CT
 Mashpee Tribe, MA
 Mohegan Nation, CT
 Nanaticoke Association, DE
 Nanaticoke Lenni-Lennapes of NJ, Inc.
 Narragansett Indian Tribe, MA
 Narragansett, RI
 Nause Waiwash Band of Indians, Inc. , MD
 Nipmuc Indian Bands, CT
 Nipmuc Tribal Council (Chaubunagungamang Band) MA
 Nipmuc Tribal Council (Hassanamisco Band) , MA
 Oil Springs (Seneca) , NY
 Oneida Indian Nation, NY
 Onondaga Nation. NY
 Passamaquoddy Pleasant Point Tribal Government, ME
 Passamaquoddy Tribe Indian Township, ME
 Paucatuck E. Pequots, CT
 Penobscot Nation, Old Town, ME
 Piscataway Indian Nation, Inc., MD
 Piscataway-Conoy Confederacy & Sub-Tribes, Inc. MD
 Pocomoke/Occhohannock Indian Association, Inc., MD
 Poospatuck, Unkechauga Nation, NY
 Powhatan-Renape Nation, NJ
 Ramapough Mountain Indians, NJ
 Scaticook Bands, CT
 Seeconk Wampanoag Indian Tribe, RI
 Seneca Nation of Indians, NY
 Shinnecock Tribe, NY
 St. Francis/Skokoki Band of Abenakis, VT
 St. Regis Mohawk Council of Chiefs (Akwasasne) , NY
 Tonawanda Band of Senecas, NY
 Tuscarora Nation, NY
 Wampanoag (Aquinnah) Band of Gay Head, MA

* Please note that the Iroquois Confederacy is made up of 6 Nations: Seneca, Tuscarora, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk.

** The list includes modern-day federally recognized, state recognized, and non-recognized American Indian Nations in the northeastern portion of the United States. Please excuse any mistaken omission of a Nation. Feel free to contact us to make corrections to this table.

¹ Sources: American Indians and Alaska Natives, Bureau of Indian Affairs, First Nations, Indian Circle Web Ring, State Recognized Tribes, US Indian Tribes by State

American Indian Nations of the Northeast

There is the theory that early humans crossed a land bridge from Siberia to Alaska some eleven thousand years ago, and that is how North America became inhabited. However, many American Indian Nations disagree. There are different variations on the story of their origin, but they all agree that they originated in North America. In addition, by 1492 there were approximately 75 million people in the Americas, speaking over two thousand different languages. In the Northeast, there were over 40 different languages spoken at that time.



American Indians in the Northeast generally lived in a woodland setting, with a diverse environment of broadleaf trees, conifers, flowering plants, mushrooms and lichens, as well as a variety of wildlife, including white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, black bears, moose and owls.

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